

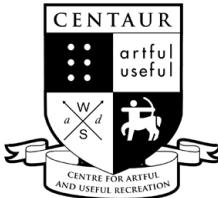
STRAY VIRASSA

THE LOST AND FOURTEENTH
HELL

A THOUSAND THOUSAND ISLANDS

STRAY VIRASSA

THE LOST AND FOURTEENTH
HELL



TEXT ZEDECK SIEW
ILLUSTRATIONS MUNKAO

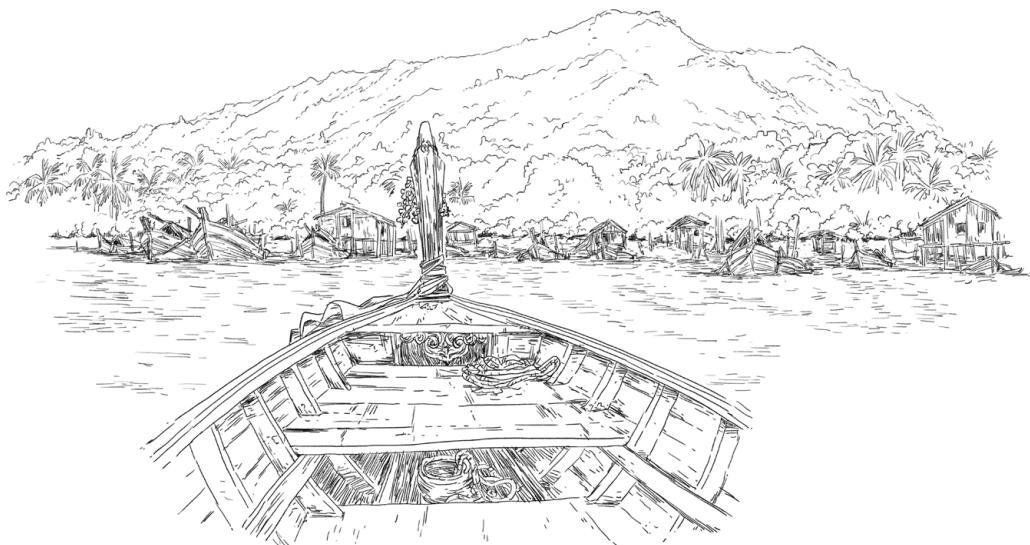
A THOUSAND THOUSAND ISLANDS



MAYBE FOUR DAYS, ON FAIR WINDS

The ship's navigator collapses. Her seizing limbs beat staccato on the deck. The captain points at her and says: "That's how you know we're near."

AN ISLAND CALLED STRAY VIRASSA



The archipelago Virassa is a chain with one link broken -- there is an orphan island, adrift from its siblings, called variously: Lodestone; the Fourteenth Hell; Stray Virassa.

Lodestone, for irony. Because something about it confounds wayfinding. Compasses spin like ceiling fans; constellations wobble like drunks; scrying spells leak like weak ejaculations.

The Fourteenth Hell, for local islanders are outnumbered ten to one by emigres from Mu -- lost souls from that faraway place, who think their life here is purgatory.

Stray Virassa, for simplicity. To reach it you must leave port, head in a random direction, and hope to lose your bearings. This doesn't always work. Getting lost takes effort.

WHO GOES TO STRAY VIRASSA



The magic of Lodestone is proverbial. But the magicians of Lodestone exact high prices. This person's need is severe:

- 1 She has an ailing father. It is one part love, seven parts filial piety. She is a good daughter. Her brothers don't think care-work is theirs to do.
- 2 He cannot forget the dancer's legs. How she smiled at him from the stage. He will slip the love potion into her post-show bowl of porridge.
- 3 When they speak they cough up maggots. It's a curse, courtesy of a business rival. They don't want a cure. They want to return the favour.
- 4 He is on the run for murder. He knifed a noblewoman's son. Now her soldiers hunt him. He hopes the isle of strays will help him stay hidden.
- 5 She slept with a demon, and her baby was born as a pug-sized slug. She will fit it with a human soul. The Fourteenth Hell has many spares.
- 6 Her skin is transparent, thanks to the Mu-folk sailor who courted her mother. She has come to find him. To ask why he let her grow up fatherless.
- 7 He cannot trust his arm. It tried to strangle him in his sleep. It tossed a cowpat at the town magistrate. He needs to get it exorcised -- quick!
- 8 They are returning to the island with precious cargo: an ampoule of tears from a crocodile god. A shaman's payment, for services rendered.
- 9 His hand was severed in a duel. This hampers his pursuit of the sword art. Rumour tells him Virassan medicine can supply a good prosthetic.
- 10 She died last month, but would not let go. Now she is a corpse. If she cannot have her breath back, at least she might be rid of the smell.



You've gotten to know them by their:

- 1 Puns. Terrible puns. Nervously delivered, painful to hear.
- 2 Constant spitting. The saliva is blood-red, from betel juice.
- 3 Left arm, bloated like a balloon animal. It is elephantiasis.
- 4 Comically high-pitched voice. As if they swallowed helium.
- 5 Polished wooden nose. How did they lose their real one?
- 6 Perfume. Floral, sickly, overbearing. What does it mask?
- 7 Scars. Discoloured pink. Covers their shoulders and back.
- 8 Crooked wig, constantly slipping off their sweat-slick head.
- 9 Mouth full of sharp teeth. Meticulously carved, curlicued.
- 10 Restless right knee, ceaselessly bounce-bounce-bouncing.



They are travelling light. Coin for expenses, dried fish, machete. And:

- 1 A glaive. Its iron haft leaves rust on your hands. Supernaturally well-balanced.
- 2 A soft bag. Its contents click like marbles. Assorted pearls and precious agates.
- 3 A potted orchid. Semi-sentient, does a full-stem shiver whenever it hears a lie.
- 4 A trio of guard-geese. Terrifyingly bellicose. Will bite, bruise, break your bones.
- 5 A bottle of fine sorghum liquor, flavoured with cloves and sour plum. Flammable.
- 6 A belly-sized flask of water. In it is a fighting betta, scales bright shining silver.
- 7 A pet mongoose, as long as your arm. Manic energy. A compulsive pickpocket.
- 8 A bundle of incense sticks. Burns as thick red smoke. Makes your eyes smart.
- 9 A belt studded with rubies, bearing sigils of Silangga's now-extinct royal house.
- 10 A neck heavy with brass amulets. Wards against bad spirits. These won't work.





SATRA, LOVELORN KNIGHT

Tasked with retrieving Annali, one of the Monkey King's concubines, from the grasp of ghost pirates -- Satra has fallen in love with her.

Has a cameo of Annali's likeness in his pocket. Sighs at it constantly. May create clones of himself from plucked tail hairs.



TERRU, SLEEPY PRIEST

Sleeps so deeply she cannot be roused. Or moved by any force. Her staff's obsidian crescent is a sign of Silamba, god of virtuous inaction.

From boat to dock to bunkhouse, Terru snoozes through the world -- drowsily waking when her war arts are needed to fight evil. After which she nods off again.

KARA LARA, HARBOUR





Fishing-village idyll. Plank jetties wind among the stilt houses. An islander jumps onto your boat to tether it. His skin is bare except for a belted loincloth.

The sun slips behind a cloud. The light shifts.

The islander is wearing a long silk vest and goldwork slippers. This finery is see-through, and a split-second out-of-sync with his movements.

Behind him some houses now have shimmering second storeys, annexes. Further back, past the shore, there are red-lacquered balconies, gilt roofs, soaring bridges. Lit by spectral lanterns abob in the wind. Echoing with raucous music.

The sights and sounds of a city: Ka-Lak-Kak.





MAGICIANS OF KARA LARA



Do spirits come to the island because of its magic? Or is the island magic because of its spirits?

Whatever the case, islanders here have a knack for sorcery. They can solve most problems. The one magic they lack is divination. Lost things are not found on Lodestone.



This islander:

- 1 Has eyes the colour of curdled milk. Doesn't react to light. Misses nothing.
- 2 Never speaks, barely nods. It is hard to know whether they've heard you.
- 3 Doesn't walk, but hovers cross-legged, a sword-length above the ground.
- 4 Never uses her hands. She points -- a civet cat performs the task for her.
- 5 Has skin wrinkled like an octogenerian's neck. Is actually in their twenties.
- 6 Has skin webbed with black veins. If they are cut they bleed ink-blue blood.
- 7 Keeps tugging the crotch of his pants. Something writhes under the fabric.
- 8 Leaves three-toed cassowary tracks wherever she steps. Has human feet.
- 9 Detached his pinkies from either hand. They inch-worm about, on his body.
- 10 Has a stingray tattoo on her back. Materialises as a real stingray, in water.

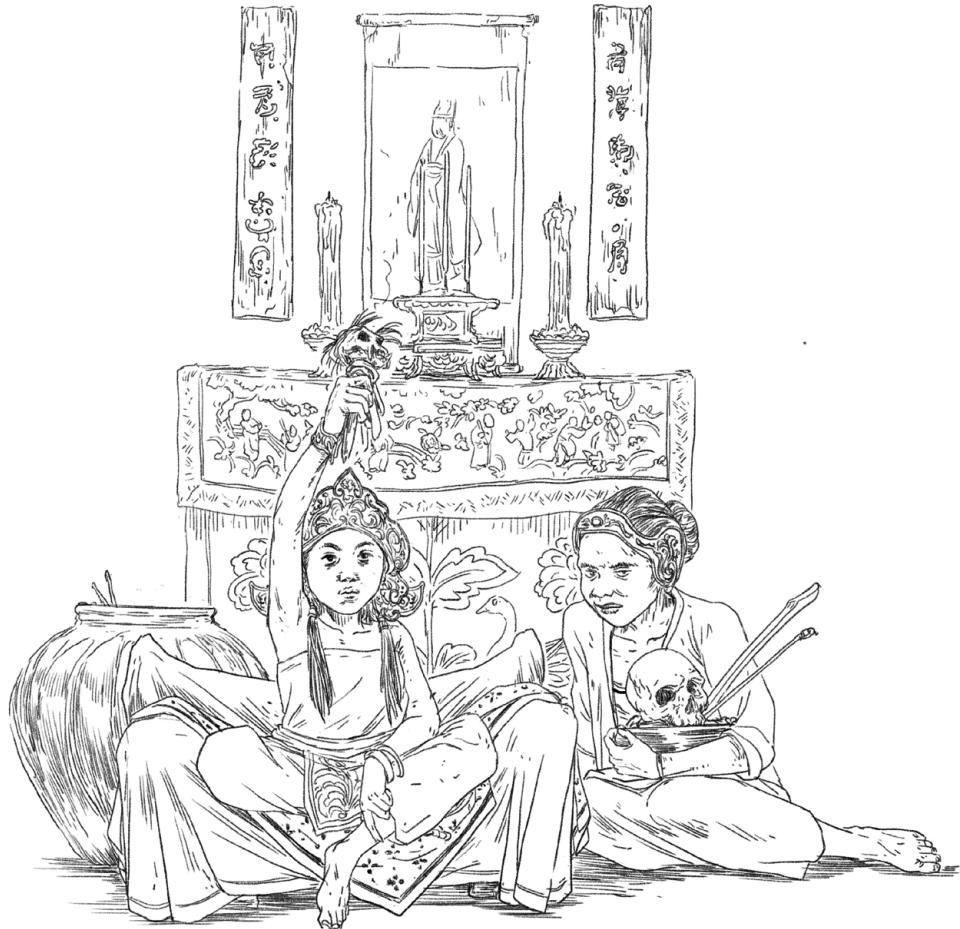
Certain signs tell of their presence, or the presence of their spells:

- 1 You shiver. Fire sears, the sun darkens skin -- but you cannot feel heat.
- 2 The needling whine of pressure in your ear. Nothing you do can pop it.
- 3 Birds and insects flying directly overhead plummet to the earth -- dead.
- 4 Dogs barking ceaselessly in the distance. Regardless of circumstances.
- 5 Shadows cast by living creatures fall towards the light, instead of away.
- 6 Children fall silent, stare at you. Genuinely unaware they are doing this.
- 7 In your hands, the flesh of any fruit turns into raw meat and marbled fat.
- 8 Flowers shrivel into tortured crystals, at your touch. Taste one. It is salt.
- 9 Flames gutter violently, even when shielded, steady only if you leave.
- 10 Rats are attracted to the outline of your shadow. They scratch it, bite it.

For their most powerful magic, they will require unusual compensation:

- 1 Bodily fluids from a god you personally revere.
- 2 A limb from one of your still-living loved ones.
- 3 Your eldest granddaughter. When she is born.
- 4 A language you know. You'll never use it again.
- 5 The heart of a whale you harpooned yourself.
- 6 A lamp stolen from the court of a tyrant prince.
- 7 Food stolen from a rival magician in Kara Lara.
- 8 A lock of hair from a sea-fairy, unwillingly given.
- 9 The luck of everybody living in your hometown.
- 10 A lump of meteoric iron, untouched by a smith.

You have one year to pay up. Otherwise the magic they worked for you reverses.



DIFFA DU, FERTILITY SPECIALIST

Small for a twelve-year-old -- and definitely too worldly. "Hey gorgeous, give Auntie Diffa a kiss!" she says, snickering, smacking your butt.

Clients see her for a chance to have children. She can put a baby in a childless woman, or in a bamboo stem. She can put a womb in a male belly. The salves she uses are infused with spook oysters, corpse oil, julienned fetuses.

Collects skulls. Any descendant of a skull Diffa owns can never disobey her word. If the flesh of said skull went into her salves -- this includes the baby she put in you.



KARANGGA DENG, FORTIFICATION SPECIALIST

He pauses at a translucent wall, surveys it with his assaying staff. "Femur awl," he says. "Medium size beads. Teak hammer." An assistant passes him the tools.

With a grunt Karangga crouches. He pokes and taps. He points without looking. "Three spoons of red-spirit paste on the southwest corner." Another assistant floats up, to do as he directs. The wall starts looking solid.

Karangga keeps Ka-Lak-Kak maintained. A ghost who offends him will find their roof a tattered web, their walls melting, their furniture fading like sighs.

KA-LAK-KAK, CITY

Lanterns of every colour. Ghost streets, ghost buildings, ghost people. As grand as Kara Lara is meagre. On overcast days it subsumes the village like an over-busy augmented-reality display.

Solid during rainstorms. Disappears in direct sunlight. If the floor vanishes you might fall several storeys. The city does not care about being corporeal-accessible.

Ka-Lak-Kak is the largest settlement of Mu-folk, outside Mu. Its inhabitants are the dead. Their journey was perilous, snarled by typhoons and behemoths.



CITIZENS OF KA-LAK-KAK



This is the Fourteenth Hell -- the Hell reserved for those lost at sea. That is what sages say, anyway. Why else would drowned souls be drawn here?

None have feet; below the knee they fade like hissing foam. This ghost:

- 1 Spills water from their mouth, as they talk. Sometimes a prawn falls out.
- 2 Has burn marks that drift across the skin, like patches of rough waves.
- 3 Leaves bioluminescent slime on anything he touches. Fades in minutes.
- 4 Has a barnacle-covered face. Feathery cirre bloom in place of a beard.
- 5 Moves in jerks, a limb at a time -- as if moved by an unseen puppeteer.
- 6 Has a hand whose five fingers end in crab claws. Clacks them as a tic.
- 7 Instantly absorbs any liquid they touch. Be careful they don't touch you!
- 8 Has no visible body. A disembodied voice and the stench of rotting tuna.
- 9 Is lit from within. He glows through his eyes, and teeth, and pursed lips.
- 10 Has a muffled voice. Like your diving partner yelling at you, underwater.





Mu-folk traditionally consider women to be unlucky sailors. The ocean is female; apparently she is a jealous bitch? Ironic, then, that the ghosts of Ka-Lak-Kak are mostly men.

They were:

- 1 A soldier. They perished battling pirates. Their crossbow has a string made of ectoplasm; it materialises bolts of flame.
- 2 A merchant. His ship carried a hold full of porcelain. Now his every motion is accompanied by the chime of bowls clinking.
- 3 An aristocrat. He was deposed by peasant revolutionaries. Whenever he tells a lie a black pearl appears on his tongue.
- 4 An outlaw. They betrayed their brothers-in-arms. Any weapon they converse with will be impelled to betray its owner.
- 5 A fisherman. A storm blew him way off course. He starved. Shadowed by a dozen phantom cormorants, who obey him.
- 6 A scholar. Dispatched by their monastery to retrieve lost scripture. May transfer any curse onto themselves, with a kiss.
- 7 An outcast. Cursed to grow the face and fur of a hog. To their nose, anything intentionally hidden reeks of rotten eggs.
- 8 An envoy. Versed in outdated courtly ritual. Break the oath you swore on their jade seal and your lungs fill up with mud.
- 9 A roustabout. He left his village to find fortune beyond the southern sea. Shares a body with his mother and infant son.
- 10 A pirate. Their flagship was set ablaze by soldiers. Anybody who hears them sing a shanty cannot resist singing along.

In this afterlife, they:

- 1 Lead organised crime. They live on the top floor of a guarded apartment block. Fearful.
- 2 Captain a pirate ketch. The ragged ghost of the vessel they went down with. Alcoholic.
- 3 Herd the floating lanterns. These flock around them like hungry pigeons. Philosophical.
- 4 Sell noodles. Their noodles fill tummies but drain energy from living creatures. Grumpy.
- 5 Write histories. Dedicated to tracing and glorifying the wonders of Mu. Grandiloquent.
- 6 Preach the virtue of suffering. Only through penance can they escape hell. Vindictive.
- 7 Chop wood. They cut the soul of a tree, not its substance; the tree crumbles. Mumbly.
- 8 Raise phantom ducks. These don't quack in your ear, but inside your head. Distracted.
- 9 Farm bone fungus. Woven palm leaves shield their crop rows against the sun. Chatty.
- 10 Beg. Their missing body parts were lost after death -- sold for measly sums. Hopeful.





The Fourteenth Hell is a web of resentments. This ghost's enemy is:

- 1 An underling, who absconded with their savings. Mainly they need their money back; nabbing the thief is a bonus objective.
- 2 Their own husband, seen with the same harlot several nights in a row. The cheating bastard and his squeeze must suffer.
- 3 A friend, who refused to toast to their success. They'll see this insult answered -- but nobody can know they were involved.
- 4 Their own half-ghost son -- though they'd never admit it. Pushes the boy, over and over, with tests nobody could ever pass.
- 5 A brother, married to the islander woman they secretly adore. Remove him from the picture, and they'd be free to court her.
- 6 Their mentor, who still judges and dictates their decisions. They don't need her removed. They just need her to be silent.
- 7 A business partner, who is driving their joint venture into the ground. Must be duped into voluntarily divesting her share.
- 8 Their former lover, now telling everybody embarrassing private details. Must be persuaded to stop. But must not be harmed.
- 9 A recent arrival, who did not show them proper deference. Will doggedly harass her, and wants all others to do the same.
- 10 Their bosom brother, who caused their death. They discovered his betrayal recently. It will be a loud and violent break-up.

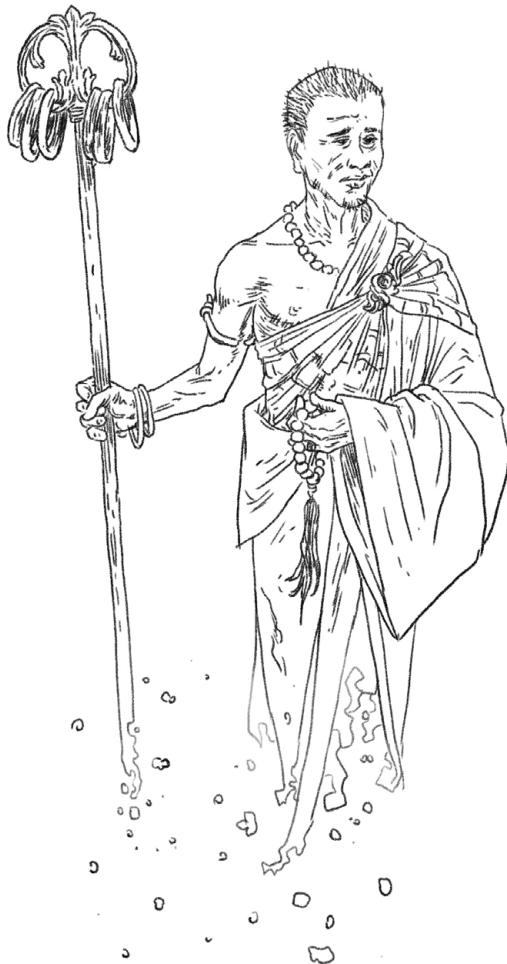


XENG XIN, TOPPLED POTENTATE

The Amber Emperor, last of his once-gleaming dynasty. "Mu is rightfully mine!" He shakes a floppy fist. "The day will come when I reclaim it."

That day has not yet come. It has not come for centuries. Whatever he says, Xeng Xin seems content, here -- running the spirit dens; pocketing his share of the pirate raids; lazing in opiate hazes.

Fishhead Kun is his most loyal lieutenant. Fishhead will hire you to capture living Mu-folk, in hopes that fresh word from the old country will stir his lord to action.

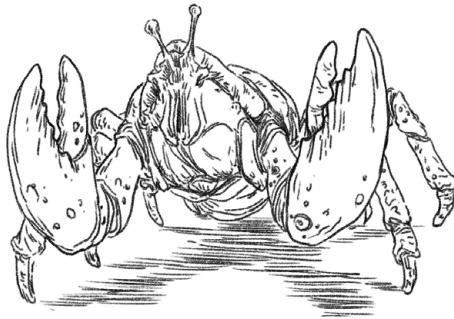


TI TA, SILENT PRIOR

Entrusted with a scroll of sacred texts, his ship was boarded by slavers. He swallowed his scroll, lest it fall to evil hands.

Now he has the voice of a god. Until he shares his wisdom, he cannot pass on in peace. Trouble is -- any being who hears Ti Ta speak turns into a loose pile of moth wings. Even a whisper makes your skin powder.

He paces the alleys, shaking his ring staff as warning, waiting for a creature holy enough to receive his truths.



CRABBY CHIM, FIST SAINT

“Hey you!” The giant hermit crab wears no shell. His eyestalks wriggle expectantly. “Want to learn martial arts?”

Prowling the seabed, he nibbled the throat of a drowned corpse, and ate its soul. Chim was a master of the punching arts: a maestro of the palm and backhand. Chim lives in Crabby, now. “Got a problem with that?”

Not a very good instructor; it’s hard to teach proper form on four legs. But a tap from his pincer still shatters your spine.

FAMILY LIFE



Love being what it is -- living islanders may take dead husbands. The ghost moves into his spouse's house, his rooms a phantasmal annex.

Children are born of such unions. These half-ghosts are see-through, in sunlight, like transparent fish: spectral flesh; solid organs and digestive tracts.

Their skin is impervious to material weaponry, but they are vulnerable to poisonous foods and fumes.

PIRACY

Raids from the Fourteenth Hell are unguided. When ghost pirates weigh anchor their boat capsizes --

Righting itself somewhere in the wide world. Exactly where is random -- though never anywhere in Mu. They may end up in a river canal or mountain lake. It hardly matters. The pirates reave and burn.

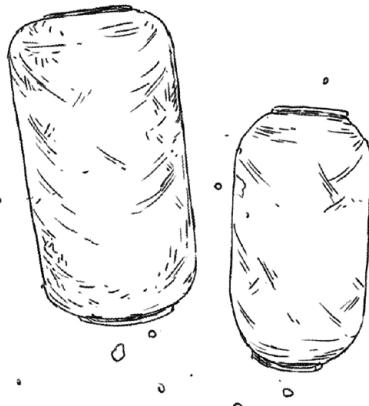
Loaded with booty and a captive or two, they sink their boat a second time. This returns them home.





MARKET DAY IN STRAY VIRASSA

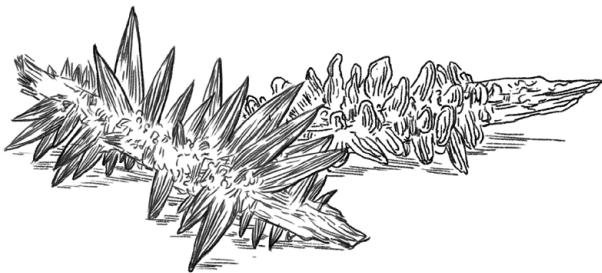
The pirates' market sells curios at arbitrary prices; they may not know their plunder's worth. The homegrown stuff's arguably more useful, anyway.



FLOATING LANTERN

A side effect of unlife is lassitude. Why bother? When a ghost gets too lazy to manifest properly, a lantern appears in their place.

Ethereal, self-propelled, everlasting. These make handy light sources. But intense emotional trauma rouses the soul within.



SPOOK OYSTER

Wherever ghost-folk are these tend to appear -- on eaves, plinths, threshold steps. Various shapes and sizes. Always black-shelled.

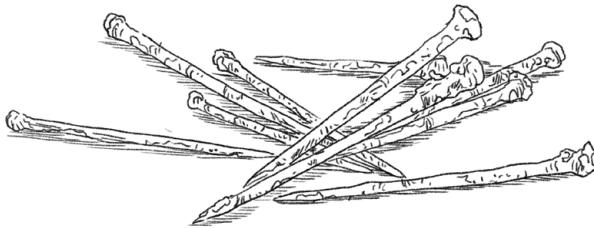
Spook oyster meat empowers sex spells. Spook oyster pearls are black; put one into a corpse's mouth to raise it as a zombie.



BONE FUNGUS

Blooms from human bones. Gelatinous texture. Like twitching chicken feet, at first, then matures into animate, five-fingered hands.

As a soup, it staves off bone loss. Eat it raw and your skeleton becomes jelly: perform all sorts of contortions; squeeze into the tiniest cracks.



WRECK NAIL

Ships are living things; they drown just as sailors do. A shipwreck's every board and nail carries shreds of its spirit.

A boat put together with nails from a shipwreck does not sink. Reality mistakes it for the previous vessel -- and a ship cannot die twice.



SPIRIT SYRUP

There are magistrates to bribe, debts to pay, bad habits to feed. A ghost might cut off bits of their body, for a quick buck.

Magicians distill this ectoplasm into a thick bubbly syrup.. Basically an energy drink; replenishes spent sorcerous vigour.



LUXURY JAR

Mu is a byword for porcelain; they make the most virtuosic pots. Spirits covet these vessels like a tech bro wants a sports car.

Good mobile homes for your pet god. Particularly attractive if they are: ornate; ancient; have survived calamity at sea. Size doesn't matter.



SRI ANDAJA, LINGUIST ERRANT

A faulty travelling spell marooned her on Lodestone. What luck! She has always wanted to study antique Mu dialects.

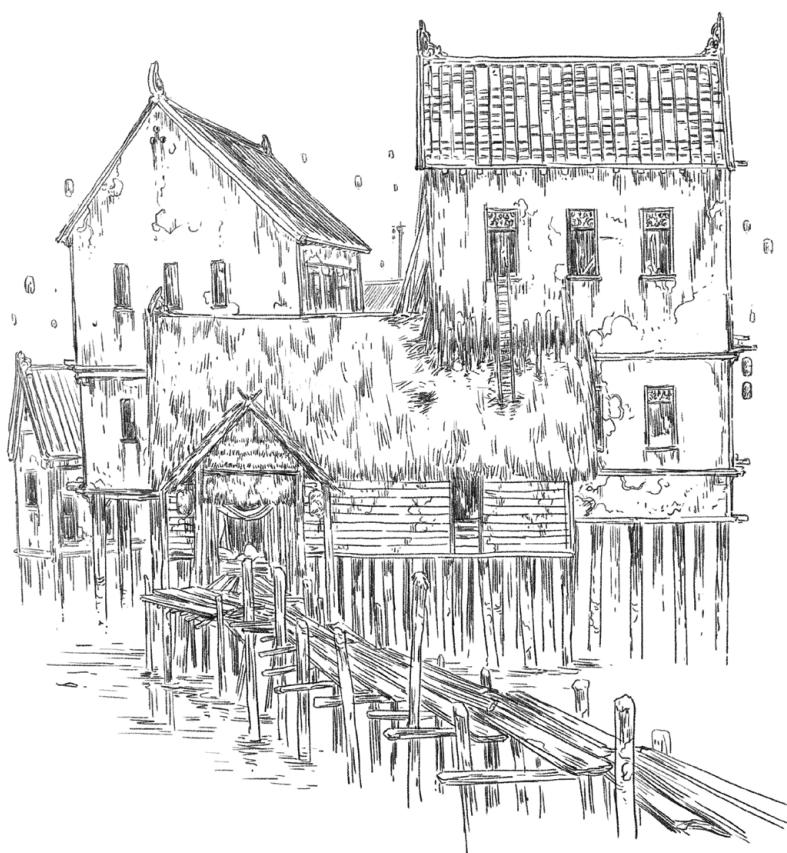
Sri Andaja needs assistants to conduct interviews and compile lexicons. Has self-writing voice-to-ink scrolls for this purpose. Help her and you can keep them.

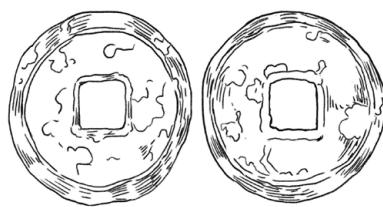


KIN KENG, FORTUNE SPECIALIST

In life he was a fortune teller. In death, he apprenticed with an Islander magician, and took over her business when she passed on.

Stray Virassa confounds fate-finding -- so Kin Keng's spells focus on making luck. With needles and knives he will carve new lines into your palm.





2020

atousandthousandislands.com